"They can more than afford to let us keep it permanently"

Amazon workers react to elimination of pandemic hazard pay

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Amazon management has announced that it will eliminate its $2 dollar per hour and double overtime pay raises for all Amazon workers at the end of the month, despite the mounting number of coronavirus infections. Management has already terminated the policy of allowing workers to take unlimited unpaid time off if they get sick.

With these provocative and gratuitous cuts to hazard pay, management is making clear what it really thinks of the sacrifices and risks that workers have taken during the COVID-19 pandemic. The company is signaling its support for the murderous drive by the American political establishment, together with ruling classes around the world, to "reopen" the economy in the midst of a pandemic which has already killed over 90,000 people in the United States and over 325,000 people worldwide.

While Amazon management deliberately conceals the global numbers of suspected and confirmed cases in the workforce, Indiana Amazon worker Jana Jumpp has been working to gather these statistics from second-hand sources. She has counted over 900 workers to date who have contracted the disease.

Yesterday, several new cases were reported at a warehouse in San Marcos, Texas, although Amazon did not say how many.

Amazon granted the pay raise in March, not as a gesture of altruism or magnanimity, but to try to coax workers back into the warehouses without adequate safety measures in the early stages of the outbreak.

One worker commented that even with the $2 raise and overtime policy, "the company still made over $30 billion in profit" during the pandemic, such that "they can more than afford to let us keep it permanently."

Another worker noted: "We should get hazard pay, which should be more than $2 dollars." Amazon workers are taking deadly risks every day, under conditions where three-fourths of warehouses have reported cases of the virus. Since workers are risking their lives every day, together with the lives of their family members, the $2 hardly reflected the danger to begin with.

"Like my job," the worker explained, "love my health and life and I love my family more."

The company has already terminated its concession with respect to unlimited unpaid time off (UPT), having hired around 100,000 additional workers to replace those who were unwilling or unable to work during the pandemic.

One Amazon worker in Oklahoma told the *International Amazon Workers' Voice* that instead of going back to work, she has taken a personal leave of absence since May 1. It was a fight to get Amazon to approve it: "But even with documentation from my doctor, I had a hard time getting it approved and it's unpaid also. Even though Amazon states that you can take 12 weeks a year, they are only approving personal leave of absence for 45 days!"

Management is desperate to keep workers in the warehouses generating profits for the trillion-dollar international conglomerate, no matter the danger. The Oklahoma worker continued: "I've been advised by my doctor to take leave of absence due to being very high risk, but it seems like Amazon could care less and they are making people practically beg for unpaid time off. I know a lot of others are in the same position and many are having their personal leave of absence completely denied!"

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Meanwhile, a recent article in the *New York Times* gave a devastating confirmation of the utterly callous response by the company in the early weeks of the pandemic, slow-walking a handful of cosmetic-safety measures while workers stayed scandalously unprotected.

The article, "Way Too Late: Inside Amazon's biggest Coronavirus Outbreak," focuses on the 600,000-sqaure-foot AVP1 facility in Hazelton, Pennsylvania, near the Pocono Mountains in the northeastern part of the state. The coronavirus has infected more workers at AVP1 than at any other warehouse across the nation, with infections totaling more than 100, according to local politicians.

As the infections mounted, over 250 workers in a 500-worker shift staged an unprecedented sickout. In the shipping department, more than 100 workers walked out when management announced more workers had tested positive. Newly hired workers, who had been bused in from hard-hit areas of New York, had to watch training videos to perform their job, as trainers walked-out for fear of being infected.

In typical fashion, Amazon attempted to smother the news of the outbreak, refusing to provide any official statement of the number of cases and deaths, claiming this would only cause undue alarm.

The current policy of Amazon is to send out robo-text messages to workers to announce the discovery of confirmed cases. These texts often contain inaccurate data, are inexplicably delayed, or are sent to the wrong workplace. Meanwhile, while management sends out piecemeal notifications to workers in different warehouses, the company refuses to give global updates of the number of suspected cases, confirmed cases, and deaths.

At AVP1, it took months before a handful of low-cost safety measures were implemented, such as hand sanitizing stations, temperature checks, and social distancing measures. Meanwhile, workers complained to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) that "there's no disinfectant we bring our own" and that Amazon had let workers with suspected cases continue to work at the plant.

One worker told OSHA that "the richest company in the world can afford to close for a few days with pay for their people." OSHA closed the complaint after Amazon supposedly provided them with documentation of its efforts to keep workers safe.

These efforts were totally inadequate, as evidenced by the fact that the virus spread like wildfire and infected more workers at AVP1 than at any other warehouse.

One worker told the *International Amazon Workers Voice* that even with the measures taken in their facility, "We keep getting more positive cases in the warehouse." Reacting to the decision by CEO Jeff Bezos to eliminate the pay increase and other concessions, another worker commented: "Another Trump, screw this man."

Bezos has piled up staggering profits during the pandemic, making approximately $35 million every day. The media carried reports over the last week that he is well on his way to becoming the first trillionaire in history.

The annual Fortune 500 rankings were released this week, which rank companies by revenue generated last year. Amazon beat Apple for second place, behind only Wal-Mart. With all the cash that Amazon has on hand, *Forbes* reported yesterday that Amazon may be interested in taking over retail chain J. C. Penney, which recently filed for bankruptcy.

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